

Discussion Guide

INTRODUCTION

Divisible only by one and themselves, prime numbers stand in stark contrast to natural numbers, upending the orderly logic of mathematics. They are strange, solitary, and disruptive. Like prime numbers, Mattia and Alice are also oddities, united in their loneliness, adrift in the normal world. Unable to fit in with anyone else, Alice and Mattia are kindred spirits, each bearing the burden of physical and psychological injuries from their childhood. Alice walks with a limp, the result of a skiing accident, and, painfully self-conscious of her body, nurses an eating disorder. Mattia's scars run deeper; devastated by the loss of his mentally handicapped twin sister and racked with guilt over his secret role in her disappearance, Mattia turns his emotional suffering into physical pain, deliberately cutting and burning himself. The relationship between these two damaged young people is the center of *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*, Paolo Giordano's brilliantly arresting debut novel.

Giordano's characters are provocative, even disturbing at times, and yet they have a fragility that evokes our sympathy. As Alice struggles to navigate the cruel and arbitrary rules of high school, she reaches out and retreats inward in equal measure, and when she is rebuked by her classmates, she turns to Mattia as her only friend. But while Alice is rejected by the world, Mattia, in turn, rejects the world itself, severing himself from any visible emotional contact with anyone else. He escapes into numbers, replacing the chaos of life with the peaceful structures of mathematics—and yet, even there, he finds Alice. Together they pass through adolescence into adulthood, and their private world expands to include a constellation of characters who love, desire, despise, and ignore them. Clinging together and yet never able to connect fully, Mattia and Alice are forced to question whether it's possible to unlock themselves from their painful pasts and overcome their deep loneliness by reaching out to each other. With artful precision, Giordano illustrates the bitter beauty of love and loss and how the two extremes are permanently intertwined. His novel is a brutally honest yet generous portrayal of two struggling souls. Mattia and Alice are neither good nor bad people, they are simply human, but they pay a deep price for the choices they make. Complex and compelling, *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* is an unsettling look at how the effects of a single moment can reverberate through a lifetime.

ABOUT PAOLO GIORDANO

Paolo Giordano is an Italian writer who won Italy's premier literary award, the Premio Strega, for *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*, his debut novel. He is a professional physicist and is currently working on a doctorate in particle physics.

A CONVERSATION WITH PAOLO GIORDANO

Q. *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* has been translated into a number of languages. How involved were you in the process of translation? How does the spirit of your work shift from language to language?

Of course there are only a few languages for which my contribution could be significant—English, French, Spanish. I read as much as I could of the translation, only to check whether the taste of the prose, its musicality and rhythm were kept. For other languages, like Dutch or German or Chinese, I can't even read what is written. In the cases I could "taste," the translations were very good, though translation always slightly changed the overall feeling of the book—for instance, making it sound more literal or easier. I had to make very few changes. By the way, I usually trust translators a lot, as I often read foreign authors translated into Italian (even English-speaking ones, as I am quite lazy) and—at least in Italy—translations are excellent most of the time.

Q. Your novel won the Strega Prize in Italy, an achievement for any author but especially for a first-time novelist. As the youngest author to win the award, how does it feel to be included with so many Italian literary giants? Are there any fellow winners whose work is meaningful to you, whether as a writer or as a reader?

At first, I felt very scared by winning the Strega Prize. I said to myself: Well, what am I to do now? I achieved the highest possible result that my mind could fancy with my first novel, so I was sure that everything in the future might only be less than that. That's why I chose to forget the prize somehow. It was a kind of removal mechanism, similar to what happens with traumas. Every time I think of the prize now, it looks like something that happened many years ago, maybe to another person. On the other hand, the prize gave me some self-confidence that I totally lacked and also, I hope, some credit with a lot of readers, which I will rely on in the future. Such big names have won the Strega Prize and many of those are important influences for me, some even from the time of high school. To name the most meaningful to me: Cesare Pavese, Alberto Moravia, Dino Buzzati, Primo Levi, Giuseppe Pontiggia, and Niccolò Ammaniti. I can relate an important part of my life as a reader to each of them.

Q. Do you see the abuse that Mattia and Alice inflict on their bodies as an attempt to assert some measure of control over their lives or are their actions more a means of self-punishment?

I always try not to psychoanalyze my characters too much. The things they do and the way they behave never follow a strict psychological analysis, as this would tear out of them some humanity and some truth, which are the two things I care about the most. Nonetheless, especially for Mattia, it is obvious to see his scars as a way of punishing himself. But it's not only that. Both for him and for Alice, mortifying the body is a way to change the focus of the attention, from some pain that affects the mind to some pain that affects the flesh. It is a way

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for stopping painful, circular thoughts and to gain some control over things. After all, our body is one of the few things we can really name *ours*.

Q. What were your considerations in choosing anorexia and self-mutilation as the characters' methods of abuse? How do gender and class play into your choices?

I have to admit I didn't really choose anorexia and self-mutilation. If I was aware at that time that I was entering those kinds of "social diseases" I would have escaped from them immediately. They slowly emerged from the story, in particular from some small gestures that Alice and Mattia did (she hid food in the napkin, he put his hands in the soil and found a cutting piece of glass). I hadn't thought of these gestures until they happened. Then, for the rest of the story, I tried to dodge them a little bit. That's why, for instance, the word "anorexia" is never used. On the other hand, gender and class definitely play a role. Let's consider anorexia, for example. In the 1990s, the time in which the adolescence of Alice takes place, anorexia was more specific of the upper class, the one she belongs to, and almost exclusively affected females. The situation's already changed. Now we know that anorexia is becoming a transversal problem, both for class and for gender (the number of males who suffer from anorexia is increasing very fast, as I read in a recent newspaper article).

Q. Some readers might claim to find your depiction of adolescence shocking while others might find it painfully familiar. In what ways do Alice and Mattia represent contemporary youth? Is there any of your own experience in either character?

I think that any honest description of adolescence has somehow to deal with fear. I think, for instance, of some of my favorite movies about teenagers: *Elephant* and *Paranoid Park* by Gus Van Sant, *Donnie Darko* by Richard Kelly, and the recent *Let the Right One In* by Thomas Alfredson. Adolescence is shocking. It's full of terror and ghosts and intoxicating joy. It's always been like this, I guess. And in that respect, my novel doesn't talk of a specific youth—not mine or the contemporary. Only the elements, the context, and the scenography suggest the atmosphere of the mid-1990s, the time of Nirvana and Smashing Pumpkins, my high school years.

Q. Pairs—or, more specifically, twins—appear a number of times within the novel: Mattia and Michela; Mattia and Alice; twin primes. What are twin primes and how does this apply to the two friends? What is the significance of the use of pairs in the novel?

Twin primes are couples of prime numbers, such as 11 and 13 or 17 and 19; namely, two primes separated by a single even number. Primes are those numbers that are not divisible by any other number other than 1 and themselves. Mattia and Alice are exactly like that: they seem not to combine with any other person, isolation seems a fundamental aspect of their lives. That is due to painful events that took place during their childhoods, but it is also due to their own specific personalities. Mattia is a sort of genius, introverted and incomprehensible; Alice is arrogant but deeply insecure. As they meet, they recognize something similar one in the other.

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For the rest of the story, they desperately try to get closer and closer, but they never really succeed. There is always something in the way—that single even number between them. They are not the only pair in the book: Mattia has a twin, Michela, and he loses her when they are children. Alice constantly searches for someone to share her life with, but she ends up with the wrong choice. The search for our twin is, after all, the search of our lives, at least for many of us.

Q. Mattia and Alice find comfort, to whatever degree they can, by connecting with each other while being disconnected from the world around them. What kind of relief does this connection provide? What would have become of them without each other?

I think there are a few special relationships in life that are so strong and intense that they reject the rest of the world. In a way, they are based on the idea of rejecting the world. At least that's what happened to me a few times. They can be friendships or love affairs, but in both cases, what is shared is so special that we think nobody outside can understand it. The friendship between Alice and Mattia is at the same time magical, weird, and strong. It is a source of relief because it protects them from the outside world that seems to hate them, but it is also the source of a new burning pain: the difficulty—almost the impossibility—to really become a part of someone else. What I've noticed during my life is that such special relationships last for only the time the pain underneath them exists. As soon as things change or this pain fades out, they also vanish, incapable of finding a new definition within a more "normal" context.

Q. Sex serves many purposes in the novel—as initiation, as empty experience, as measure of isolation—yet rarely as pleasure. Why do Alice and Mattia resist a physical expression of their emotions?

Sex is one of the situations where all things submerged in our subconscious come out, all fears, all desires, all the violence, and all the needs. That's why sex, in my opinion, is never as easy as television shows or jokes present it to be. We are often told that taking pleasure, especially from sex, and surrendering to it are things that happen naturally, gestures that come for free. I find it harder, instead, to learn how to surrender than to learn how to resist. That's exactly what my characters suffer from: the difficulty of covering the distance between desires and their fulfillments, the difficulty of doing "easy" things, such as kissing a girl or lying in bed with her, difficulties that are not only due to external causes, but also often to internal ones.

Q. Why did you decide to structure the novel in stages rather than as a continuous whole? What do the gaps between the years tell us?

I find that time gaps give a story a deeper breadth. Years and situations that are not told by the author give the reader a space where he/she can be free to make the story his/her own story. In my novel I also skipped some parts that could be seen as important, but I'm sure there are always sufficient elements for anyone to fill in the gaps with his own memories and emotions.

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And also a love story— this is a love story—always needs to travel across the years, even across an entire lifetime.

Q. What was the impulse behind the main metaphor of the novel? Have you always been fascinated by numbers?

The metaphor came by chance. I've always been fascinated by prime numbers because they are a very easy thing to define—they require only arithmetic. Also, an eight-year-old boy knows what they are, but still the mystery associated with them is unsolved, though all mathematicians have somehow dealt with it since the time of Archimedes. Nobody can predict what will be the next prime number discovered. So it was natural to me that Mattia, who becomes a mathematician, was intrigued by prime numbers. That's why I started building the metaphor. Then I learned about the existence of twin primes: it was exactly what I needed.

Q. Your readers might not realize that you are a physicist as well as an author. Could you tell us a little more about that side of your life?

After high school I found myself in a profound dilemma: I was mainly fascinated by literary studies (philosophy above all), but I was aware that a scientific background would help me understand the nowadays-world better. Then I chose the scientific subject that to me looked more similar to philosophy and I joined the university of physics. I still think it was the right choice. During the years of university, I was totally embedded in physics and the further I went in learning the bigger my fascination became, especially for the microscopic world of elementary particles and of quantum physics. After graduation I started a Ph.D. program in particle physics, which I'm finishing now.

Q. How do you meld your scientific and artistic work? What prompted you to write a novel?

I wrote the novel during one of the busiest times of my life, as I was writing my thesis and then preparing for the admission exam to the Ph.D. program. But it's always been my peculiarity to work better when I'm under pressure. I did physics during the day, often until 7 or 8 p.m. Then after dinner until late in the night I wrote the novel (only a couple of days a week, otherwise that would have been suicide). The reason I started writing was that, after five years of enthusiastic studies, I started to feel a bit bored with physics. I needed something different. When I was younger I wanted to be a rock star, but I found out I didn't have the talent for that. I knew that writing was the only possibility left for doing something different, but I had to wait for that particular time to find the courage to start. Now that the book has had this huge success, things have turned the opposite way around: I write for most of the day and, when I have time, I go on with my research activity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What pleasure or power do Mattia and Alice get from harming their bodies? Think about the moments in the novel when these acts occur. Do you think they are in response to something and, if so, what?
2. There is a brief moment at Viola's party where Alice and Mattia walk together and their respective scars seem to melt into one another and disappear. How? In what other ways are Mattia and Alice complementary?
3. Examine the relationship between Alice and Viola. Based on Alice's feelings toward Viola and Viola's treatment of Alice, what do you think about Alice's actions when they meet later in life?
4. What is it about adolescence that makes people so cruel? What was your own adolescence like? Did Mattia's and Alice's experience with their peers echo your own in any way?
5. Where are the parents in this novel? What presence or power do they assert? Why?
6. Was Mattia's action with his sister understandable? Was he aware of the possible consequences or not? Should children be held accountable when their actions have such severe consequences?
7. One of Alice's few pleasures in life is photography, an art that consists of capturing a moment and presenting it according to one's own perspective. Why is this pursuit appropriate for Alice?
8. Mattia believes that "feeling special is the worst kind of cage that a person can build." What do you think he means by this?
9. Do you think Alice really sees Michela in the hospital or was she hallucinating? Why?
10. Examine the last paragraph of the novel. What is being said here? What happens to Alice? What happens to Mattia?